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# Criminal Rituals

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## **Abstract**

Why do criminals use rituals? Past work argues that criminal rituals provide a sense of continuity or certainty in an inherently uncertain environment. We argue instead that rituals play an important organizational role. Criminal rituals facilitate internal governance and promote group activity through three mechanisms: creating common knowledge, mitigating the costs of asymmetric information, and shaping identity among group members. Using internal documents and written constitutions, we apply this framework to understand the internal governance mechanisms used by the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Chinese-based Green Gang.

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# 1. Rituals, Governance, and the Green Gang

Throughout history and around the world, rituals have played a crucial role in human societies. They are practiced in religions, tribes, clubs, universities, and governments. They also exist in the criminal underworld. A ritual is “a predictable and regular observance of some act or procedure, which has a symbolic element resulting in the inculcation or reinforcement of shared values and beliefs” (Coyne and Mathers 2011). Rituals vary in their degree of formality, whether they occur periodically or intermittently, and range from simple acts (such as saluting a superior military officer) to elaborate and complex procedures (like the opening spectacle of the Olympic ceremony). Scholars in anthropology and religious studies have examined the role of rituals in a wide-range of situations and have analysed the meanings and messages that people associate with them. (See, for example, Bell 1992, 1997; Collins 2004; Durkheim 1915[1995]; Geertz 1973; Goffman 1956; Goody 1961; Irons 2001; McCauley and Lawson 2002; Rappaport 1999; Turner 1969.) Explanations of criminal rituals, however, are mostly absent from the literature.

Past work has described the fact that organized crime groups often use rituals (Abadinsky 2003, 157; Ianni 1972, 23) and that there are ritualistic aspects to street gang initiations (Sanchez-Jankowski 1991, 50). In discussing the rituals used by Italian mafia groups, Diego Gambetta (1993, 146-153) argues that a ritual may simply be the act that finalizes the agreement (akin to signing a contract) that indicates a new recruit is officially a member. Alternatively, he argues that a ritual may provide an “ephemeral certainty” in a world of great uncertainty (Gambetta 1993, 151-153). The spectacle and flair that often characterizes rituals can also contribute to developing or propagating trademarks deployed in the criminal underworld, which are important due to the lack of enforceable contracts (Gambetta 2009, 195-229).

Scholars have recently applied the tools of the rational-choice framework to understand the observed variation in use of non-criminal rituals, their permanence and change, and how they solve

social and economic problems (Chwe 2003; Coyne and Mathers 2011; Hugh-Jones and Reinstein 2012). We build on this work by offering a rational choice explanation of criminal rituals. In doing so, we contribute to debates in two literatures.

First, we aim to make sense of which groups use criminal rituals and why. The goal of our analysis is to show that rituals provide a tool to enhance the coordination, cooperation, and productivity of criminal groups. Explaining criminal rituals therefore helps us to understand broader issues of governance within criminal organizations (Catino 2014; Dick 1995; Leeson 2007; Leeson and Rogers 2012; Leeson and Skarbek 2010; Levitt and Venkatesh 2001; Mansour, Marceau, and Mongrain 2006; Reuter 1983; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991, 63-100; Skarbek 2010, 2011, 2012). This research examines how, and how effectively, criminal groups operate. We argue that rituals are an aid to organizing criminal groups.

This provides an original approach to understanding the reason for criminal rituals that challenges the standard interpretation of them based on cultural or non-rational forces and those that argue that economic analysis has little to offer to the study of organized crime (Allum and Sands 2004). Likewise, it challenges the view that in studying organized crime, economists “have little to say” about phenomena closely linked to it, such as loyalty, fear, threats of violence, and actual violence (Kleemans 2012, 621).

Second, this paper contributes to the literature that looks at how informal and non-traditional institutions of governance contribute to social and economic coordination in the absence of strong, effective government. These studies identify how trade takes place without government-enforced contracts by the use of self-enforcing exchange mechanisms. (See, for example, Bernstein 1992; Clay 1997; Greif 2006; Landa 1981; Leeson 2009; Milgrom et al 1990; Richman 2004; Stringham 2015). An important source of order often comes from mafia groups, which provide extralegal governance (Bandiera 2003; Gambetta 1993, Milhaupt and West 2000; Shortland and Varese 2014; Sobel and Osoba 2009; Varese 1994, 2005, 2011; Wang 2014). Because of the illicit nature of their activities,

organized criminal groups cannot rely on formal, state-based governance institutions. This literature identifies the mechanisms that promote self-enforcing trade. We contribute rituals—which create common knowledge, mitigate asymmetric information, and alter social identity—as important new mechanisms of self-governance in the criminal underworld.

While we provide a variety of descriptions of which types of crimes are associated with rituals, we will also focus on the rituals and organization of a specific group, the Chinese-based Green Gang of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. In particular, we analyse their three written constitutions. This is a useful case to study because the gang's permanence and prominence indicate that it has overcome basic governance challenges, it makes extensive use of rituals, and we now have access to a suitable amount of information about its internal governance. A single case study limits generalizability, but it also allows for analysing specific mechanisms in a context in which our theory predicts we would find them. Importantly, we believe that institutional solutions are context-dependent (Greif 2006, 14-28), so our task here is to identify how they operate in this particular situation, not to make claims about how rituals always operate.

The information supporting the study of the internal governance mechanism used by the Green Gang is drawn from Chinese language academic publications. The Green Gang, as the most powerful criminal syndicate in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, has been well researched by a number of contemporary Chinese historians and criminologists. For example, Qing Baoqi's 2009 book *Zhongguo dixia shehui* (China's underground societies) presents a historical review of secret societies from the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) to the Republic of China (1911–1949), including a detailed discussion of the Green Gang's origin, organizational structure, internal rule, and initiation ritual. Zhao Hong's 2012 book *Minguo sanda banghui zhi qingbang* (The Green Gang as one of three major secret societies in the Republic of China) offers the most comprehensive descriptive analysis of written rules developed by the Green Gang.

In his 2009 book *Zhongguo youzuzhi fanzui yanjiu* (Research into organized crime in China), He Bingsong—a leading criminologist in China—offers a vivid and detached analysis of the ways in which the Green Gang gained control of illegal markets (e.g. gambling, prostitution and opium trade) and expanded their sphere of influence to legal areas (e.g. banking and food supply) by employing criminal constitutions, organized violence and mutually-beneficial networks with warlords and governments. Furthermore, Su Zhiliang and Chen Lifei, Shanghai-based historians, in their 2004 book *Jindai Shanghai Heishehui* (The Shanghai Green Gang in modern China), provides a subcultural explanation of the Green Gang’s internal governance (gang rituals and rules), ‘Chi jiangcha’ (an informal way of dispute resolution) and secret languages. All these books offer essential materials for this research.

In addition, we also made use of China Academic Journals Full-text Database to select journal articles that were relevant to this topic. Keywords such as ‘banggui’ (criminal constitution), ‘ruhui liyi’ (initiation ceremony), ‘banghui wenhua’ (the culture of secret societies) and ‘shiyao’ (the oath of loyalty sworn) were used in searching the database. This strategy helped us identify a dozen highly relevant journal articles, providing supplementary information to our analysis.

The use of internal documents has proven reliable in past work, which has used accounting records (Levitt and Venkatesh 2001) and written constitutions (Leeson 2007; Leeson and Skarbek 2010) to understand the internal governance institutions of organized criminal groups. They provide an effective way to “get inside” these secretive groups. Because the evidence is archival and qualitative, we cannot use conventional econometric tools to analyse them. Instead, we rely on an analytical narrative approach, which is common in studies of institutions (Bates et al 1998; Greif 2006).

The illicit nature of criminal activity means that organized criminal groups must provide, to some degree, their own extra-legal governance institutions (Reuter 1983, 109-131). The state’s employment statutes cannot regulate internal conflicts between employees and employers. Labour contracts are not enforceable in government courts. Law enforcement cannot ensure the safety and

security of an employee's person and belongings. The lack of recourse to formal mechanisms brings informal, internal governance mechanisms to the foreground.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Green Gang was one of the most powerful secret societies in China. Its membership was composed of large numbers of boatmen and professional salt-smugglers (Martin 1991). The group's main sources of income were trafficking in salt, opium, and women. At the beginning of the 20th century, there were only six major branches in the Green Gang: the Jiang Huai Si, the Jia Bai, the Xing Wu Si, the Xing Wu Liu, the Hang San, and the Jia Hai Wei (Martin 1996). However, the collapse of the small peasant economy and the establishment of extraterritoriality led to a weak central government that was unable to suppress the criminal underworld. This provided favourable conditions for the development of secret societies and the Green Gang recruited increasing numbers of marginalised workers and peasants (Chesneaux 1971; Su and Chen 2004; B. S. He 2009). As a result, by the 1940s the number of gang branches reached approximately 128 groups (Chen 2005; P. He and Wang 1993). Each branch was a loosely affiliated group of gangs rather than a unified criminal group. These gangs "did not have precise geographical areas of activity, and their areas of predominance depended on the movements of [gang] leaders" (Martin 1996, 22).

Each branch was hierarchically organized and members' personal connections were used to develop extensive networks between branches. These networks enabled the Green Gang to establish itself as a mutual-aid organization, providing rudimentary support and governance functions, such as temporary accommodation, dispute settlement, medical care, and burial for the dead (Martin 1991). Like many instances of impersonal exchange in the absence of effective formal institutions of governance (Weiner 2013), the social order was largely clan-based. Martin (1996, 18) explains, "the Green Gang organized itself along fictive kinship lines with members regarding themselves as belonging to an extended clan system" (see also Xia 2008). Twenty-four generational names (*beizi*) were assigned to the ladder of different generations (Kong 2002). A generational name was given to

every new member and the standing of each member depended on rank through generational position within the hierarchical “family” tree. In the following analysis, we examine the basic structure of the group and the key elements of the Green Gang’s rituals and written constitution to illustrate some of the organizational mechanisms of criminal rituals.

## 2. A Rational Choice Analysis of Criminal Rituals

Rituals benefit the people who use them. These benefits may be psychological, emotional, spiritual, and cultural, but they can also provide solutions to important organizational dilemmas. There are three main mechanisms, we argue, through which rituals can enhance the effectiveness of criminal groups: by creating common knowledge, reducing asymmetric information, and reducing social distance.

### 2.1 Common Knowledge

Rituals help establish common knowledge about a group’s internal rules of governance (Chwe 1998, 2003). Common knowledge about the rules means that not only do all members know the rules, but they know that everyone knows the rules, that everyone knows that everyone knows the rules, and so on. Because rituals are carried out in the presence of many or all members of the group, they create common knowledge. Everyone sees and hears that everyone else sees and hears the rules. Rituals are also often carried out in a circular layout, which enhances visibility of other members (Chwe 1998). Many rituals also involve repetition of key ideas, mantras, and concepts, which assures members of the creation of common knowledge (Chwe 2003, 4). When all participants repeat mantras, it becomes clear if someone says something different. Speaking in unison makes deviations—which might reflect a member’s misunderstanding—stand out. The absence of deviations reinforces the belief of shared knowledge. Likewise, even if a participant becomes distracted during the ritual, repetition help to ensure that he does not miss key information.



Common knowledge helps people solve coordination problems within a group, which arise when peoples' goals are largely in agreement but there is indeterminacy or difficulty in coordinating each person's actions to achieve desired ends (Schelling 1960, 81-118). For example, it may be that each member of a prison gang wishes to assault a guard, but only if he knows that everyone else in his gang will participate too. If there is indeterminacy or uncertainty among the gang members and they cannot solve this coordination problem, then they do not achieve the outcome that they all desire—harming the guard.

When communication is possible, solving coordination problems may be easier. For example, a Hispanic prison gang in Los Angeles distributes written rules that tell members how to behave. Rule 28 requires that “if one of the Homies feels disrespected and takes off (attacks) on the *judas* (correctional officers), all Homies will follow (back him up).” This rule helps to solve the coordination problem about whether other gang members should take part in an assault. Yet, communication is not always possible or effective. The illicit nature of criminal activity means that participants have an incentive to be discreet. They must avoid detection by law enforcement, alerting rival groups to their activity, or attracting the attention of extortionists and thieves (Schelling 1971, 645). Written records and rules can also serve as incriminating evidence. The environment in which these groups operate may also undermine communication. Inmates, for example, face substantial barriers to speaking with other inmates. When communication is prohibitively costly, people often rely on focal strategies. A focal strategy is a choice or solution that people coordinate on in the absence of information because the choice seems natural, special, or relevant (Schelling 1960, 53-80). Especially in situations characterized by conflict, people tend to rely on cultural, historical, and social cues to coordinate behaviour (Leeson, Coyne, and Boettke 2006). Rituals make particular actions and strategies more focal.

However, solving coordination problems remains difficult even when communication is possible. The prison gang's Rule 28 is most effective if the gang members have common knowledge

about it. If each gang member knows the rule, but doesn't know that others know he knows it, then it won't facilitate cooperation as effectively. Each member wants assurance that his associates will join with him in the assault. Not just knowledge of Rule 28, but also common knowledge of it promotes the group's joint efforts.

If rituals create common knowledge, then they will be more important when criminals face more serious coordination problems. This suggests the following proposition:

**Proposition 1:** Criminal rituals become more important when (a) the number of people involved increases, (b) when the tasks become more complicated and interdependent, and (c) when communication is more difficult.

The need to create common knowledge varies across criminal activities, and the evidence on criminal rituals appears consistent with these claims. First, groups rather than individuals alone typically practice criminal rituals. Crimes committed by a single individual—such as a mugger in a dark alley—have no one with whom to establish common knowledge and no need to do so. Crimes involving multiple people, but that are not part of an on-going enterprise, such as rioters looting a store, face fewer and less serious coordination problems (Collins 2009, 247-253). We don't observe rituals associated with these crimes. If communication is easy, then coordination problems are less serious. A pair of corporate embezzlers who work in the same office, for example, may have free reign to conspire with each other, so there is little risk of coordination failure. In contrast to their apparent absence in these situations, rituals are quite common in on-going enterprises, such as with Italian mafia groups (Abadinsky 2003, 157; Ianni 1972, 23).

Second, when the success of an enterprise is dependent on a larger number of people completing certain tasks in particular ways, coordination becomes more important. For example, pirates in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries needed to act in unison when engaged in battle. It was essential that they worked together to sail the ship and orchestrate the attack. This required demarcated roles,

responsibilities, and leadership (Leeson 2007; 2010). Common knowledge also aided pirates' prevention of predation by the captain. Pirates created common knowledge through the ritual process of drawing up written social contracts, which all members of the group affirmed unanimously and publicly prior to setting sail (Leeson 2009).

Common knowledge also aids internal cooperation in another way. It facilitates punishment of rule violations. Internal rules are more likely to be followed if there is a cost to violating them. However, each group member may prefer to free ride on others' enforcement to save effort and avoid conflict. Self-enforcing rules are more effective if there is also a meta-rule to punish people who do not punish rule violations that they observe (Axelrod 1986). To punish people for not enforcing rules, it must be clear that everyone knows both the rules and the meta-rule. Rituals create common knowledge about both.

The Green Gang faced several challenges in creating common knowledge: a large number of gang members operated in different regions, existed within complicated trans-regional criminal networks, and faced risks associated with the dissemination of information. In the period from the late Qing dynasty until the Republic of China, the Green Gang was one of the largest criminal organizations. In the 1920s and 1930s, the total number of Green Gang members in Shanghai reached 100,000, representing over three percent of the city's population (Martin 1996). The large number of members enabled the Green Gang leaders to achieve substantial control over the criminal underworld, but it posed significant organizational challenges.

The Green Gang operated three major criminal activities: salt smuggling, opium trafficking, and women trafficking (He 2009). These illegal businesses required the Green Gang members to establish trans-regional criminal networks. Salt smuggling required exploiting a price differential between various regions. The Green Gang controlled the smuggling of the salt from in the Liangzhe area (a coastal area including Zhejiang, Shanghai and southern Jiangsu) to inland China, such as Huainan and Huaibei areas (Lu 2006). In the late nineteenth century, gang members could not employ

modern technology to communicate with counterparts in other regions, and moving illicit goods was risky and costly. Moreover, it was hard for gang leaders to monitor their remote businesses. The gang had to find ways to facilitate the mobility of people and goods as well as regulate trans-regional group activities. Another challenge for the Green Gang was the threat of suppression by the government. The illicit nature of their activity meant that the Green Gang had to conceal information about its activities and its members. However, this also increased the costs of communication. Furthermore, illegality deprived the Green Gang members from the legal protection offered by the state and increased the cost of recruiting trustworthy members.

The Green Gang's initiation ritual was an elaborate affair, modelled on Buddhist monasticism (Chesneaux 1971). Anyone who wanted to be admitted first had to find an inductor/master (*yinjin shi*) who was already a senior Green Gang member and able to introduce the applicant to a master/teacher called "a master of studies" or "master of original life" (*benmen shi*). Meanwhile, the applicant also had to find "a master of preaching" (*chuandao shi*), who was invited to supervise the initiation ceremony and teach the applicant how to behave according to the Green Gang's essential principles (Zhao 2012). According to the Green Gang manuals, these three masters must not belong to the same gang branch (Chesneaux 1971).

During the period of the Republic of China (1912 – 1949), the initiation ceremony (called *xiangtang*) was divided into two stages: the small ceremony (*xiao xiangtang*) and the big ceremony (*da xiangtang*). In the first stage, an applicant for membership had to attend a ceremony held in a small incense hall, which involved burning incense and performing a sequence of three sets of three kowtows (*sangui jiukou*) before the altars containing the tablets representing "The Three Patriarchs" (Wen Yan, Qian Jian and Pan Qing). He would then perform the same sequence of three sets of three kowtows before the "teacher" and then kowtow three times to each brother (members who belonged to the same generational status). During the ceremony, the "master of preaching" introduced the applicant to the

history of the society, the *Three Gangs and Nine Generations*<sup>1</sup> (*sanbang jiudai*), *Ten Great Rules of the Society*, and *The Bottom of the Ocean* (*Haidi*, refers to society's secret language) (Cai 2009; Tan and Peng 2002). By providing this information to the applicant during the ritual, all members present had common knowledge about the applicant's exposure to the material.

## 2.2 Asymmetric Information

In addition to solving coordination problems, criminals who wish to act jointly also face the problem of asymmetric information (Akerloff 1970). Information asymmetries exist when one party to an exchange has superior information than that possessed by the potential trading partner, and this can lead to market failures where mutually beneficial exchanges do not take place. The problem arises when one side to the transaction cannot discern the quality of the good or service being offered, creating an incentive for low-quality suppliers to claim they are high-quality suppliers. This leads to a pooling equilibrium, where the other party cannot distinguish between high- and low-quality, and as a result, to the partial or complete unravelling of the market. The potential gains from acting jointly are lost.

Yet, criminals have an incentive to mitigate the harms from this market failure. An important way of doing so is the use of credible signals of information. A signal is credible if those who are high quality can send a signal at relatively lower cost than those who are low quality, such that the former find it worth sending and the latter do not. Effective signals create a separating equilibrium and are a common solution to asymmetric information problems found in economics (Spence 1973), biology (Grafen 1990), religion (Sosis 2003), and warfare (Sosis et al 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> 'Three Gangs' (*sanbang*) refers to the names of the branches which these three masters (the inductor, the teacher and the master of preaching) belonged to. 'Nine Generations' (*jiudai*) means the names of the three masters and these masters' 'master-fathers' and 'master-grandfathers'.

Gambetta (2009) documents numerous signalling mechanisms used in the criminal underworld. Consider, for example, the problem faced by people who wish to share child pornography with each other. Each benefits when he finds trading partners. The danger is that, in searching for like-minded individuals, one will provide incriminating information to law enforcement officials (or to someone who will inform to law enforcement officials). Asymmetric information about the identity of potential trading partners will lead some child pornographers to stop searching entirely. To solve this problem, they devise signalling strategies to identify whether someone is in law enforcement. One internet group, called the Wonderland Club, required potential members to possess 10,000 images of child pornography to gain access to the group. These images were checked by a computer program to ensure that they were not simply taken from sources already available online (Gambetta 2009, 62). If law enforcement officials wanted to join the club, they would have to come into possession of a large amount of new child pornography. If they are not able or willing to do so, then this requirement creates a separating equilibrium that effectively screens for trustworthy members.

Rituals can sometimes provide credible signals of unobservable characteristics. For example, a lavish quinceañera or bar mitzvah might signal status or social capital if it is less costly to host such an event for someone with an abundance of these unobservable characteristics. Likewise, duels served as a screen for social capital among aristocrats during the 16<sup>th</sup> to late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Allen and Reed 2006). If rituals are capable of sending a credible signal of information about unobservable characteristics, then they reduce the costs associated with asymmetric information:

**Proposition 2:** Criminal groups are more likely to use rituals when there is asymmetric information about an important, unobservable characteristic.

Partaking in a ritual will provide a credible signal of unobservable characteristics if participation is cheap enough relative to the benefits that only people who possess the desired characteristic find it worth doing. Past work on non-criminal settings has argued that rituals provide signals, but this research has not explained where the credibility of the ritual signal comes from in those instances that

do not appear to impose differential costs (such as Coyne and Mathers 2011, 77). In the criminal context, for example, joining a prison gang often requires that a recruit publically assault an enemy of the gang (Skarbek 2014, 114-117). This is a costly ritual because he may be hurt in the process or face disciplinary consequences from prison officials. This ritual is less costly for someone who is skilled at prison violence and dedicated to the gang, so it provides a credible signal of the unobservable quality of a potential recruit.

However, the cost differential is not as easily identified in other criminal rituals. Consider the induction rituals used by the Sicilian Mafia (Gambetta 1993, 146-155). The basic format involves the presence of other mafia members, one of whom uses a needle to draw a drop of blood from the initiate's finger. The blood is dripped on a card bearing a depiction of a saint. It is then lit on fire and passed from hand to hand among them. The mere act provides little information about the quality of the initiate's unobservable characteristics. Instead, the cost differential here is that the ritual makes a person subject to the criminal groups' rules. Part of the mafia oath (in one description) is, "I swear to be loyal to my brothers, never to betray them, and if I fail may I burn and be turned to ashes like the ashes of this image" (Gambetta 1993, 147). A participant in the initiation ritual of the Caboneria mafia group declares, "I consent, and wish, if I perjure myself, that my body may be cut in pieces, then burnt, and my ashes scattered to the wind" (Gambetta 1993, 149). Violation of the rules is punishable by death, and the ritual signifies an opting-in to that set of rules. Likewise, prison and street gang members often distinguish between people who are regular citizens and those who are "in the game" and therefore held accountable to the code of the street (Anderson 1999). The latter are expected to follow certain behaviours and values to which the former are not held. For example, joining the Nuestra Familia prison gang requires making a lifetime commitment to the group, which if violated is punishable by death (Skarbek 2014, 116). If members cannot easily discern the quality of a recruit, then the process that makes the group's rules binding acts as a credible signal. A lifetime commitment is relatively less costly for someone who is truly devoted to the gang than to someone who has doubts.

The rules that rituals make binding thus serve as effective signals of unobservable characteristics, such as loyalty.

Consistent with this, rituals are less important in the exchange of goods, where quality is relatively easier to identify. The quality of cocaine can be determined at little to no cost and immediately on inspection. Information asymmetries are more important when quality is not readily apparent, as is often the case with assessing the quality of labour services that a potential group member offers (Spence 1973). Without the aid of effective signals, looking at a person rarely provides clear information about his loyalty, ability to act under pressure, knowledge of particular criminal activities, connections with other criminals, and personal history. When groups punish mistakes and betrayal with death—and when those rules are made binding in an initiation ceremony—rituals elicit important information about a recruit's ability and dedication. This helps explain why criminal rituals are often associated with initiation practices in particular.

For people seeking membership in the Green Gang, the “small ceremony” was a prelude to a longer training process and to a larger ritual, both of which mitigate the costs associated with asymmetric information. After the small ceremony, the applicant underwent observation for a probationary period before being granted full membership. The teacher/master normally spent three years or more in assessing the performance of the applicant. The probationary period provided gang leaders with enough time and opportunity to assess the quality of the applicant. If an applicant qualified for full membership, he or she would be admitted in the big ceremony (*da xiangtang*) which was more complex and formal and held in a great incense hall (Tan and Peng 2002). New members, normally called “disciples,” were given a generational name (*zi*), which fixed their position within the Green Gang hierarchy. The new members' generational status within the Green gang, as Martin (1996, 18-19) explains, “would be the one immediately below that of their ‘teacher.’”

The use of multiple elaborate rituals, which included exposition of the group's rules, created common knowledge about the entrants understanding of the rules, including the prescribed penalties



for violating the society's code (Martin 1996). This was done partly through communication of the rules, and the consequences of violating the rules, to the applicant, but in addition, the big ceremony ritual established common knowledge about the teacher's certification of the quality of the applicant. Their symbolic rebirth during the ritual involved a hand-washing and mouth-cleansing ceremony, and importantly, the expressions "hand washing" and "mouth cleansing" were Green Gang slang words meaning "to kill" (Chesneaux 1971; Davis 1977; Martin 1996). It offered a public recognition by the applicant of the consequences of violating the group's rules. The gang's constitutions outlines, for example, the punishments for certain offences:

*Art. 3.* After entering, you must neither debauch a brother's wife, daughter or sister nor betray your brother(s): if you do, you will be punished. If the situation is severe, you will be burned to death.

*Art. 4.* After entering, you must neither steal brothers' money and property nor seduce brothers' wives or concubines: if you do, you will be punished. If the situation is severe, you will either be burned to death or be buried alive.

Rituals enhance the effectiveness of internal governance institutions, but the design and incentive-compatibility of the rules themselves matters as well. The Green Gang's ritual involved repetition of key ideas and values, which linked closely with its internal rules. They had a formal constitution, a set of written rules that governed the gang (see Appendix). Copies of the secret book containing the society's rules, argot and hand gestures were distributed to new members, who were required to memorize this confidential information (Su and Chen 2004). The key component of this constitution was the *Ten Great Rules of the Society*. Under these rules, members were forbidden to disrespect their 'teachers' and the Green Gang ancestors, betray the society, or oppress the weak by employing their strength. They were also required to keep the rules secret, treat insiders and outsiders differently, and help each other in the event of disaster or misfortune.

In addition to *Ten Great Rules*, a number of supplementary rules and proscriptions were created to settle disputes among brothers, encourage them to obey and venerate their masters, and persuade

them to act according to the Five Constant Virtues of humanity (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*) and faithfulness (*xin*). As with many rituals, the information regarding the society's rules and proscriptions was summarized into a series of verses.

The Green Gang constitution provided mechanisms to promote a harmonious relationship between teachers and disciples. It offered a set of basic moral principles specifically for disciples within the gang. For example, Article 1 of *Ten Great Rules* stated that disciples must respect and obey teachers. Article 6 showed that even if disciples won promotion (in local or national government) or became rich, they must not despise their teachers or "families." *Zunshi zhongdao* means respecting the teacher and paying attention to principles.

In order to avoid conflicts, disciples in the Green Gang were prohibited from becoming disciples to two teachers simultaneously, and were prohibited from recruiting new disciples on behalf of teachers (Tan and Peng 2002). Moreover, the power of a teacher to recruit new disciples was limited to avoid disputes with current disciples. Article 4 of *The Green Gang's Ten Prohibitions* states that a teacher who "closed his door" (*guan shanmen*) is prohibited from opening his door again and recruiting new disciples. Green Gang leaders chose to close their doors when they were very old. This rule enabled their disciples to expand their influence by recruiting new members. If a gang boss who "closed his door" opened his door again, this would cause conflict with his current disciples, especially those who had already become influential gang leaders, because the new members would belong to the same generational group as them, thereby reducing their status.

The Green Gang constitution also included a number of rules regulating disputes among brothers in the same generational group. Behaviours such as debauching a brother's wife, daughter or sister would result in severe punishment. Behaviours that sought personal benefit at the cost of others (e.g. other members and teachers) were strictly prohibited. The punishments set up by the Green Gang were used not only to prevent exposure through carelessness and treachery, but also to control internal conflict. Two types of courts were regularly organized in order to settle disputes among different

branches and to sanction those who violated the rules (Cai 1987). The first type was “the arbitration court” (*pingshi xiangtang*), a temporary institution consisting of three progenitors<sup>2</sup> and four influential branch leaders (*sanlao sishao*) with the authority to settle disputes within the organization. The second type was “the criminal justice court” (*xingshi xiangtang*), designed to identify the facts concerning rule violations and sanction misbehaviours (Qin 2011).

The Green Gang constitution identified different types of offences and their appropriate punishments, including corporal punishment (beating with wooden staves), exile or expulsion, *sandao liuyan* (stabbing the lower leg in three places, resulting in six wounds), *jiudao shiba ba* (stabbing the thigh in nine places, resulting in eighteen wounds), and death by drowning or burying (Su and Chen 2004). Compared with a ritual that “affirmed the solidarity of members by dramatizing the common culture of the secret society,” sanctions “ensured [the solidarity of members] by both the discouragement of intra-society conflict and the negation of the validity of the outside world” (Davis 1977, 147).

To operate effectively, the Green Gang had to overcome the interrelated problems of identifying the quality of recruits, educating them about the group’s rules, and coordinating activity among a large, geographically dispersed membership. Their written constitutions detailed the rules and values that its members were required to follow. The “small ceremony” ritual and the probationary period that followed helped ensure that applicants learned the appropriate information and were of sufficient quality. The “big ceremony” initiation ritual provided a credible signal, and common knowledge of, the applicant’s quality and of the teacher’s certification.

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<sup>2</sup> The criminal justice court was required to set up altars containing the tablets representing the three progenitors (Weng, Pan and Qian), indicating that these ancestors were invited to settle internal conflicts. This strategy empowered branch leaders with the authority to judge various types of disputes.

## 2.3 Identity

The final mechanism through which rituals facilitate organization is in creating and shaping a person's identity. A person's identity is the social category and corresponding norms with which he or she identifies. Different social categories possess different norms and values (see, for instance, Aguiar and de Francisco 2008; Akerlof and Kranton 2010, 13). When a person's identity coincides strongly with the group's norms and desired ends, cooperation becomes easier. There is greater personal motivation to contribute to the group. Janet Landa (1994, 29) argues, "many social rituals and customary practices of specific ethnic or tribal groups...can all be viewed as ways individuals in different societies establish individual and group identity for the purpose of coordinating the activities of interdependent individuals." If all members of a criminal group identify themselves, for example, as "outlaws" who will never inform on each other to law enforcement, then the group does not need to invest as much to protect against betrayal. On the other hand, when people view themselves as "outsiders" or more socially distant, cooperation becomes more costly. A criminal group operates more effectively if its members' identities coincide with the group's goals. Rituals help to alter a person's identity and can reduce social distance, thereby helping criminal organizations to run more smoothly.

Drawing on past research about shaping identity within non-criminal groups (Akerlof and Kranton 2000, 2005, 2010), we argue that criminal groups find it more profitable to invest in altering identity under certain conditions. If one's identity determines how much effort to exert, then altering a person's identity becomes more beneficial when monitoring that person's actions becomes more costly. Shaping a member's identity creates personal motivations to avoid shirking. This suggests the following proposition:

**Proposition 3:** Criminal groups are more likely to use rituals the more costly it is to monitor members' behaviour.

We should expect criminal groups, like the Green Gang, who are more geographically disbursed to use criminal rituals more often than those who operate closely to each other. Their rituals sought to create loyalty to a fictive kinship created by the Green Gang, and it replaced allegiance to the state by absolute allegiance to criminal constitutions and the secret society (Davis 1977; Tan and Peng 2002). The ritual disengaged potential members from orthodox society. Changing one's identity was further encouraged as they underwent a symbolic death through a change of hairstyle and being dressed in similar robes.

Many of the benefits of membership in an organized criminal group take the form of club goods, such as the gang's reputation or ability to control an area. Often, the group members themselves must produce these club goods. For example, adding another gang member to a street corner makes everyone in the gang safer. When the benefits of group membership have these characteristics, there is the potential that members will free ride on others' efforts. If one gang member knows that others are already defending their corner, then he can forego doing so. If enough other members do the same, then the gang's territory is not secure.

Rituals can help promote contribution to the group's club goods. Reducing social distance within a criminal group simultaneously increases the social distance with people from the out-group. As interacting with outsiders becomes relatively less desirable, members spend more time with their own group. If the alternative to spending time with the gang becomes less beneficial, then it is relatively less costly to contribute to the club good. Rituals shape identity in a way that makes participating with members of the out-group less feasible or desirable. Groups thus have an incentive to alter their members' social distance to enhance contributions to the club good.

### 3. Conclusion

Some, but not all, criminals use rituals. We argue that there are practical, organizational reasons for why groups choose to use rituals. Because of the illicit nature of these groups, they cannot rely on

state-based governance institutions. By creating common knowledge, rituals help overcome coordination problems. This helps explain the use of rituals by criminal groups with more members, more complicated and interdependent activities, and in groups that are more permanent. By binding a recruit to the group's rules and recognized punishments, rituals provide a credible signal of a person's unobservable characteristics, often their loyalty and devotion to the group and its rules. Finally, rituals provide a way for criminal groups to shape members' identities to cohere more closely with the goals and ends of the group. Each of these provides possible mechanisms through which criminal rituals can play a role in promoting organized crime. The internal governance institutions of the Green Gang provide supportive evidence on several of these mechanisms.

## Appendix

### **The Green Gang's Ten Great Rules**

*Art. 1.* After entering the Green Gang, you must respect and obey teachers. Those who do not comply with this command will be punished. According to the level of seriousness, you will be caned, expelled from the Gang or burned to death.

*Art. 2.* After entering, you must respect the Green Gang ancestors. Those who do not obey this rule will either receive warnings or be caned.

*Art. 3.* After entering, you must neither debauch a brother's wife, daughter or sister nor betray your brother(s): if you do, you will be punished. If the situation is severe, you will be burned to death.

*Art. 4.* After entering, you must neither steal brothers' money and property nor seduce brothers' wives or concubines: if you do, you will be punished. If the situation is severe, you will either be burned to death or be buried alive.

*Art. 5.* After entering, you must keep the society's secrets and treat insiders and outsiders differently: if you do not obey this rule, you will be punished. According to levels of seriousness, you will receive a warning or be expelled from the Gang or be burned to death.

*Art. 6.* After entering, you swear that if you win promotion (in the government) or become rich, you must not despise your teacher or ‘family’ or acknowledge a new teacher: if you do, you will be punished.

*Art. 7.* After entering, you must not break the rules: if you do, you will be punished.

*Art. 8.* After entering, you who want to earn respect must act according to the Five Constant Virtues: benevolence (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), ritual propriety or proper conduct (*li*), wisdom (*zhi*) and sincerity (*xin*).

*Art. 9.* After entering, you must not seek personal benefit at the cost of others: if you do, you will be punished. If your behaviour leads to a severe outcome (e.g. death or serious injury), you will be burned to death.

*Art. 10.* After entering, you must not oppress the weak or the poor by employing your strength: if you do, you will be punished.

### **The Green Gang’s Ten Prohibitions**

*Art. 1.* Father and son are prohibited from making themselves disciples to the same teacher, and they are prohibited from belonging to the same generational status group.

*Art. 2.* A disciple is prohibited from choosing another (gang) leader as a new teacher after the death of his original teacher.

*Art. 3.* A disciple is prohibited from making himself a disciple to two teachers simultaneously.

*Art. 4.* A teacher who ‘closed his door’ (*‘guan shanmen’*) is prohibited from opening his door again and recruiting new disciples.

*Art. 5.* A teacher is prohibited from recruiting a new applicant if his current disciple vetoes that new applicant.

*Art. 6.* Generational brothers are prohibited from becoming teachers to their own generation.

*Art. 7.* A senior member is prohibited from introducing new would-be disciples to a teacher who belongs to the same branch (This is because the rule requiring an introducer and a teacher from different branches enables criminal groups to establish wide links with other branches).

*Art. 8.* A disciple is prohibited from disrespecting the Green Gang ancestors, his teacher and his brothers.

*Art. 9.* A disciple is prohibited from recruiting new disciples on behalf of his teacher.

*Art. 10.* All Green Gang members are prohibited from changing their generational names (zi).

### **Simplified Rules for the Shanghai Green Gang in the early twentieth century**

The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed the increasing convergence of two powerful criminal organizations in the Yangtze delta: the Green Gang and the Red Gang (also known as the Society of Brothers) (Xia, 2008). The Green Gang relaxed its rules and increased its openness in order to adapt to the changing socio-economic environment. The simplified rules adopted by the Shanghai Green Gang in the early twentieth century were listed in the following:

*Art. 1.* Green Gang members must unite and fight against the common enemy.

*Art. 2.* Green Gang members must have collective consciousness: you must be faithful and loyal.

*Art. 3.* Green Gang members must rescue a brother who encounters pressing difficulties (e.g. arrested by law enforcement agencies).

*Art. 4.* Green Gang members share the society's profit equally.

*Art. 5.* Green Gang members must keep the society's secrets.

Any Green Gang member who breaks the rules mentioned above will be punished. There are three different levels of penalty: (1) *Sandao liudong*, refers to stabbing the lower leg in three places, resulting in six wounds; (2) *Jiudao shiba ba*, refers to stabbing the thigh in nine places, resulting in eighteen wounds; (3) death by drowning.



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